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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the sources of fear among incoming undergraduate students and discusses possible ways to alleviate such fears. The paper reports that, though many students have difficulty naming their fears, several can easily be identified such as fear of the unknown. This fear can be dealt with or forestalled through tours of the campus. Another category of fear discussed is the fear of failure at the college level. Students fearing failure often suffer from low self-esteem and are insecure about the new academic experience. These fears can be addressed at student counseling centers. Many students, the paper suggests, labor under self-fulfilling prophecies of failure or lack of ability. To illustrate how student fears can be addressed, the paper presents a case study of one student who suffered from a fear of failure and low self-esteem with the consequence that she was drastically underachieving and becoming frustrated. With the help of the counselor the student took a fresh look at past performance and established a reasonable "internal yardstick." The paper also discusses the usefulness of Robert Sternberg's identification of 20 stumbling blocks that can impede even the brightest individuals. In conclusion the paper argues for telling students of qualities that define a successful student. (JB)

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OVERCOMING COLLEGE FEARS.....

The Road to Success

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Abstract

Freshman students often report experiencing anxiety over the thought of starting college. When they are questioned as to the source of this fear, they find it difficult to specify their reasons. This article explores some of the underlying sources of college anxiety. Case studies from the college counseling center at Berkeley College in New Jersey show how students can overcome their fears, and find the road to success.

Overcoming College Fears...

The Road to Success

Incoming college freshman often report becoming anxious before entering college. The transition from High School to college can bring certain fears to the surface. Likewise students who return to college after many years absence from academia report similar fears. When questionned about these fears, students find it difficult to identify exactly where the problem lies. What fears could freshman have about the exciting journey that awaits them?

Fear of the Unknown

One category of fear perhaps involves the fear of the unknown. Any new experience that one knows little about can be scary. However, on holidays and birthdays we receive unknown gifts that are new and different , yet we do not fear them. Maybe it is all how one packages things. An attractive package that we are expecting is one that we look foward to receiving. College officials need to let freshman know that there is joy and beauty in the gift called college.

One way we can help our freshman students is to make what is unknown more familar to them. Tours of campuses are very popular events that help familarize students with their new environment. Observing classes in session, meeting with faculty and students, all help to reduce some of these fears. The counseling centers on campuses should be an integral part of any tour, so the students know where to go and who they can talk to when things become stressful.

Fear of Failure

Another common college fear is the fear of failure. Some students doubt their ability to succeed at the college level. These students have often received negative feedback throughout their elementary and high school years. They suffer from a low self-esteem and are insecure about this new academic experience(Cohn,1991). They may have the potential to do well in school, but are underachieving. Freshman may be afraid of making mistakes. In the counseling center at the writer's college, the students are told that making mistakes are important. It is a way of learning about our strengths--what works well for us, and what does not work. It is only when we do not learn from our mistakes and refuse to correct them that they become failures. An analogy between learning to walk for the first time and starting college is relevant to this discussion. When we first learn to walk, we all fall down, but we get up again and keep trying to walk. That is what success is; getting up just one more time than you fall down! (Human Resources,1991).

Self- fullfilling Prophecy

Well meaning guidance counselors sometimes steer students away from attending college. They advise the student to consider the workforce instead. In today's economy,many vocations call for more than a High School diploma. The student receives a "can't do" message, further lowering their self-esteem. Often this leads to a cycle of low grades and low achievements, fullfilling the prophecy of failure (Hanna,1991).

The recording artist, Cher sings a song entitled If I could turn back time(1989). The words say:"If I could trun back time, I'd take back all the words that hurt you." If the writer could turn back time as an Educational Psychologist, She would take back all the "red" marks on elementary school papers, and replace them with blue ink,highlighting all the correct answers, versus pointing out so vividly all the wrong responses. Focusing on what did work for the student, versus empasizing the errors helps to build the student's self-esteem. This motivates them to succeed and reduces their fears. Seven blue check marks for correct answers looks a lot more hopeful than three red marks for errors. Seventy percent is an average grade, yet most students are made to feel inadequate for being average. The student was certainly more right than wrong, but they do not get that message.

Case Study

Recently, a student came to the counseling center at the college. As an educational psychologist, I work towards making people see that they have the potential to achieve, whether it be in school or in the business world. The freshman was suffering from a fear of failure and low self-esteem. She had the potential according to her test results, to do well, but was drastically underachieving. She was becoming increasingly frustrated by her lack of school success. She was even becoming concerned about having to drop out of college.

I asked her to tell me the total number of failing grades that she received while in High School. As it turns out, there were very

few failures. She had achieved far more passing grades, and even a few high scoring grades. The student was experiencing perceived failure versus an actual lack of success. She had started to give up on herself due to this erroneous self- perception. She began to set lower goals for herself. The system had sent her negative feedback and she began to give up on herself.

One of the techniques that worked well with this student was to establish an internal yardstick for her. When she received a low grade, such as a "D" on an exam, she learned through counseling to take small steps at a time. She aimed for getting a "C" on her next exam, and in fact easily achieved the higher grade. Her next goal was to attempt a "B" on test three. A very excited student entered the counseling center after test three, waving an "A" grade like a proud flag. Reaching the next higher gradation on their own internal yardsticks, motivates students to succeed again.

Currently, this student is doing very well in college. She has regained her self-confidence. The freshman has learned to focus on her successes and to overcome her college fears. College counseling centers can offer support that underachieving students need to become successful(Cohn,1991).

Intelligence Applied

In Robert Sternberg's (1986) book Intelligence Applied, he focuses on why intelligent people may fail. Sternberg has identified twenty stumbling blocks that get in the way of even the brightest people and prevents them from being academically successful. One

barrier to academic success deals with a lack of motivation. Sternberg writes:" It scarcely matters what talents people have if they are not motivated to use them " (Sternberg,1986,p.339).

Sternberg divides motivation into external and internal sources. Many of our students are still immature and rely on others for their motivational rewards. We need to help them move towards being internally motivated. As educational psychologists, this is an area we can work on with our students to develop their self-esteem and to set those internal yardsticks. First semester students often rely on the outer directedness of their college teachers to tell them exactly what to do. Successful students learn to become inner directed and self-motivated as they advance through college(Rich,1991).

Another barrier to success, according to Sternberg(1986) is the fear of failure, which was previously addressed.People may not reach their full academic, social,or business potential because they avoid facing the important challenges in life(pp.341-342). It is easier for some students to spend a lot of energy and time dodging the system than doing their work as assigned due to this fear of failure. Avoiding the challenges that a college system requires, for fear of failure, holds the student back and lowers their self-esteem.

The concept of self-confidence can also be a factor in a student's success. "A lack of self-confidence seems to gnaw away at a person's ability to get things done and become a self-fullfilling prophecy" (Sternberg,1986,345). If a student thinks that they can not do something they may not even try to do it. How can others believe in our students if they do not believe in themselves. Hence, they underachieve and

fail to set appropriate yardsticks for themselves. They have a pattern of learned helplessness. Once again, in the privacy of a college counseling center,we can rebuild students confidence, highlight their strengths, and give them the will to persevere.

Successful College Students

To further help incoming freshman overcome their college fears, we should also identify for them some traits that define a successful student. Successful students tend to be risk takers. Just enrolling in a college might be a risk for some students, yet they do it, and take that first step towards success. Successful students also learn from their mistakes. Remember, it is not a failure if you are willing to correct your mistakes and to learn from them. They need to recognize their successes and to overcome their failures(Johnson,1990).

Another characteristic that defines a successful student is that they see life as a challenge. Life is viewed by this student as a roller coaster, with its ups and downs. As long as they believe that "life" is going to return to the top again for them, they rise to the challenge. Successful students are also persistent. They are willing to keep trying. If something does not work the first time, they find another solution until they are successful.

It is difficult for many people to appreciate their own success. Successful students have learned to celebrate their victories. They are proud of their own achievements.Lastly, successful students can envision their future. They can see themselves as successful people.When things become blurry, or lose their focus, successful students have the ability to fine-tune their lives and to become even more goal directed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, college faculty, administrators, and counselors need to help their students overcome their college fears. Students need to focus more on their successes, and to learn from their mistakes. Successful students are confident enough to believe in themselves, and expect others to likewise appreciate their abilities. College students can benefit from a quote by Eleanor Roosevelt, while thinking about overcoming their college fears. Roosevelt said:"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face...You must do the thing you think you cannot do" (Source unknown).

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